

# Of Speaking, Writing, and Developing Writing Skills in English

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## Abstract

Of the four core language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing, writing is obviously the most difficult skill for second and foreign language learners to master. The main reason for this difficulty is the fact that writing is a very complex process which involves both creating and organizing ideas and translating them into cohesive texts which are readable. However, in the English classrooms in India, this skill is generally taken for granted with little or no focus on the complex process of writing.

This article takes up this issue, beginning with a few introductory remarks on the teaching of English language skills in the Indian context, and then moving on to a discussion about the differences between speech and writing before proposing a five-step procedure for the development of writing skills in English.

**Keywords:** Language skills, speaking, writing, cohesive texts, second language learners

## Skills Tapestry

When we consider second or foreign language pedagogy today, we tend to focus our attention on the development of the four macro-skills – listening, speaking, reading and writing – on the acquisition of which hinges the ability of the language user to use the language with proficiency in a variety of contexts. Of course, there is a school of thought which believes that in the tapestry of a language, the linguistic elements and skills are woven so intricately together that they can't be separated without destroying the fabric of that language. While there's no gainsaying that such a view has weight and we, therefore, advocate the teaching of language skills in an integrated way, it is also essential sometimes, especially in an acquisition poor

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environment, to isolate a specific skill and its sub-skills for focused attention. In this way, language teachers can help second or foreign language learners in honing specific language skills to perfection.

### **Traditional Neglect of Language Skills in India**

In the Indian context, all the four language skills have been traditionally neglected with teachers generally doling out lessons on formal grammar, focusing on the development of meta-lingual knowledge, thinking that this would in turn develop the ability of the learners to use the language well. Unfortunately, however, this focus on meta-lingual knowledge, which over-emphasizes formal analysis and entails the use of a lot of grammar terminology, has not been able to deliver the hoped-for result, which is, as Rivers (1983: 33) very aptly points out, “to produce students who can communicate about anything and everything in the second language, comprehending and creating at will novel utterances that conform to the grammatical system of the language (whether in speech or writing).” As a consequence, we generally have English language users with poor skills, unable to use the language for communication, be it in the spoken form or in the written form. Historically, linguists and educational researchers have held contradictory positions vis-à-vis the relationship between speaking and writing.

### **Importance of Writing**

Whereas traditionally, linguists have always given primacy to speech, going to the extent of pointing out that written language is “merely a reflection of spoken language” (Weigle, 2002: 15), educational researchers have generally held that written language should be more valued because it is more “correct” than the spoken form. In contemporary English language pedagogy, we tend to reconcile these two extreme positions, giving primacy to neither but accepting the difference between the two media. For one thing, speech takes place in context, which often makes references clear. Writing, however, creates its own context and therefore has to be fully explicit.

### **Hidden and Imperceptible Contact**

In the spoken form of a language, the speaker and the listener are in contact, and hence they are able to interact and exchange roles. The reader, on the other hand, is not usually in the company of the writer making interaction impossible. Also, immediate feedback, both verbal (through questions, comments, grunts, murmurs, etc.) and non-verbal (through nodding, facial expressions, etc.), are expected and given in speech, whereas no such immediate feedback is possible in writing.

Therefore, proficient writers often try to anticipate reader's reactions and incorporate them into their texts. In speech, sentences are often incomplete, marked by hesitations and pauses, some redundancy and repetition, and a range of devices like stress, intonation, body movements and gestures are used to convey meaning. In writing, on the other hand, sentences are expected to be carefully constructed, linked and organized to form a text.

Besides, as Tickoo (2003: 58) points out, "writing makes heavier demands on vocabulary than does speaking...because effective writing requires a far larger number of words." Hence it is not very difficult to appreciate that writing, though it draws on many of the same linguistic resources as speaking, represents a distinctly different ability which needs to be focused upon and developed thoroughly in an instructional setting in *English as a Second Language* (ESL)/*English as a Foreign Language* (EFL) contexts.

### **English Classroom in India**

In the Indian English classroom, what has traditionally been happening in the name of developing the composition skills in English is summed up very pointedly by Tickoo (2003: 57):

1. The teacher sets a writing task.
2. The pupils write a composition and hand it in.
3. The teacher corrects its grammar and spelling often using a lot of red ink, or asks the pupils to either copy the model composition written by him/her or follow the one found in their composition book.
4. The pupils look at the teacher's corrections.
5. They (may) hurriedly rewrite or make changes to satisfy the teacher.

## **Deficient Methodology**

There is something fundamentally wrong about this methodology of teaching composition. Besides amounting to teaching by testing, this methodology doesn't focus even on the awareness, let alone development, of the processes involved in the skill of writing. However, this has been going on unabated in the Indian English classroom, with teachers generally confining their teaching of writing to the following three forms of writing: letter writing, paragraph writing and essay writing.

While focusing on the forms of writing in the classroom is not a crime, doing this by totally obliterating any focus on the dynamics of the different types of writing like descriptive writing, narrative writing, expository writing, argumentative or interpretative writing, etc., doesn't help in developing the writing skills of second or foreign language learners at all.

## **Writing Skills Development Procedure Suggested**

In order to offset this imbalance, I propose the following 'writing skills development procedure', which could be adapted in the ESL/EFL classroom. This procedure entails five steps which show detailed planning on the part of the teacher.

**The first step** is that of *setting the context*, which means a writing context here. The writing context could be a letter of complaint or a postcard from a holiday destination, etc. Setting and maintaining a good context, which is plausible, interesting and vivid, is essential in terms of both engaging the attention of learners and generating the target language necessary for writing. Normally, teachers are prone to giving it all away, garrulous as they usually are! Instead of this, eliciting as much of the context as possible from the learners would be a good idea. Elicitation helps learners draw upon their existing knowledge, enabling them to make connections between the old and the new, besides making the classroom more learner-centred.

**The second step** is that of *focusing on content* for a piece of writing. Here, teachers could get the learners to brainstorm content ideas, and then board them using a mind-map or a

spidergram. At this stage, which is a pre-writing one, teachers should be careful not to ask for a finished text; asking for bullet points should suffice. Another important point for teachers to consider here is the lexis that the piece of writing might require. For this, some vocabulary could be pre-taught before the learners venture into the act of writing.

In the next step (**Third Step**), which is concerned with a *focus on the development of writing skills*, a ‘distressed model’ could be supplied to the learners. In this ‘distressed model’, the words could be jumbled, or there might be grammar errors or spelling mistakes. Depending on what teachers want to focus upon, this model could also have an incorrect lay-out, jumbled paragraphs or lines, or inappropriate register. The purpose is to provide an opportunity to the learners to notice the errors, and later, focus on them for rectification.

This discovery approach to teaching, in which there is less direct instruction on the part of teachers as they lead the learners towards knowledge through activities and discussions, is beneficial as the learners are more actively involved in the learning process than they usually in a teacher-fronted lecture-based class. At this stage, the focus is on the use of language, such as the use of narrative tenses or comparatives, or the use of adjectives for descriptive writing, or the conventions of letter-writing, etc.

Teachers can also focus here on the use linkers and discourse markers in texts (a genuine problem area for all second and foreign language learners), different registers, lay-outs, etc.

The next step (**Fourth Step**) is what can be called *crafting*, in which the learners could be supplied with an activity whereby they (preferably in pairs or groups) can discuss and prepare their own version of the target text, as introduced by the ‘distressed model’. Group-work and pair-work are especially beneficial because learners tend to learn from one another’s efforts.

The final step (**Fifth Step**) is the one of *drafting*, in which the learners, individually or together, write up the end product.

## To Conclude

In this way, teachers of English can develop the writing skills of their learners through the process approach to teaching writing whereby attention is paid to both the higher level skills of planning and organizing and the lower level ones of spelling, punctuation, grammar and lexical choice. The biggest virtue of this approach to teaching writing is that it provides the learners, as Seow (2002: 316) points out, “with a series of planned learning experiences to help them understand the nature of writing at every point.”

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